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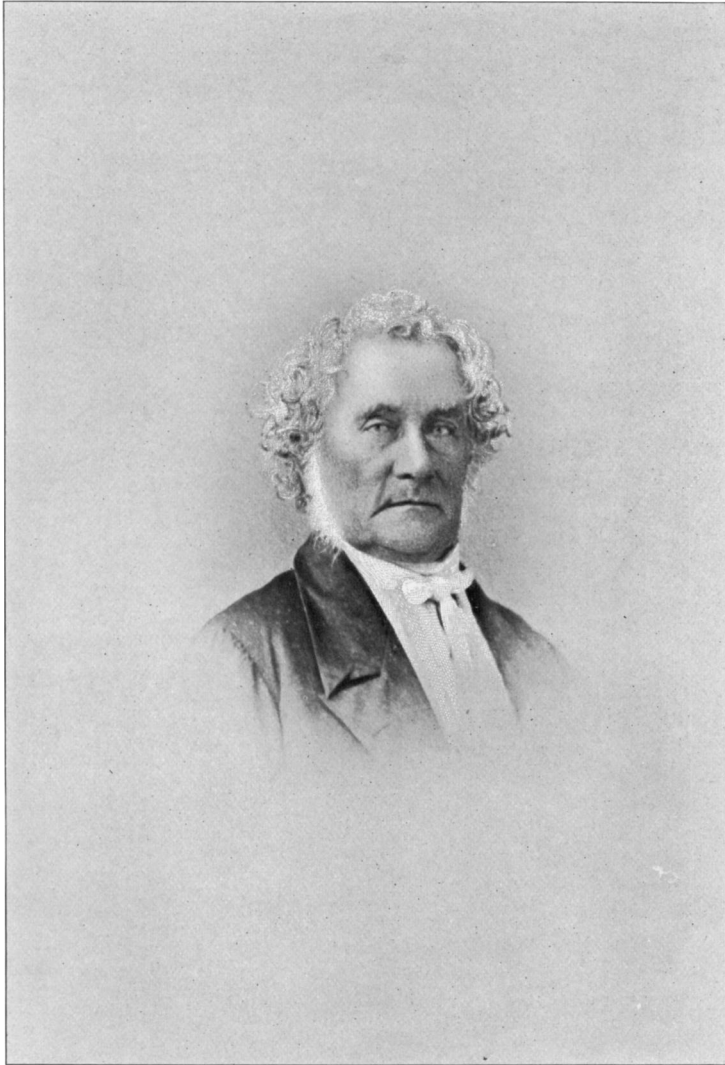
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From photograph by Alexander Gardner about 1860.

PETER FORCE.

BORN 1790, NOVEMBER 26—DIED 1868, JANUARY 23.

THE LIFE AND LABORS OF PETER FORCE, MAYOR OF WASHINGTON.

BY

AINSWORTH R. SPOFFORD

"The world knows nothing of its greatest men," sang the poet of Philip Van Artevelde, sixty years ago; and in these days of cheap reputations we may truthfully re-echo the sentiment. The life of such a man as Peter Force, who died in Washington at the ripe old age of seventy-seven years, was worth more to American letters and to human history than that of almost any forty of the generals and other notables, whose names are blazoned on the scroll of fame. Yet he was suffered to pass away with a brief "obituary notice" in the corners of the newspapers, while the names of ignorant and presumptuous nobodies, whom some accident had elevated into notoriety, filled the public eye. But notoriety is not true fame, and the appeal continually lies from the days to the years, and from the years to the centuries; and in the high court of the centuries, where all the errors of the courts below are reversed, the cause of those "uncredited heroes" and unobtrusive workers, like Peter Force, who raise no ripple on the sea of current history, will be adjudged, and they will be elevated to a place in the temple of fame as lofty and illustrious as the fruits of their unpretending labors, enjoyed and used by mankind at large, can justly entitle them to.

Peter Force lived for more than half a century in Washington, having removed here in 1815 from New

York. He found Washington a straggling village of wood, and left it a stately city of brick and marble. He filled various public and responsible positions in municipal affairs and national associations. He was, during nine years of his busy life, editor and proprietor of a daily journal, which enjoyed the confidence of Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams; but it is not as mayor of Washington, nor as editor of a political paper, that he will best be remembered. His characteristic merit, which differences him from the Ritchies, the Duff Greens, and the F. P. Blairs, who also bore an active part in political journalism at the National Capital, is that he was more than a journalist—he was a historian.

Born near Passaic Falls, N. J., on November 26, 1790, his father, William Force, being one of the veterans of the Revolutionary War, Peter Force was by lineage, as well as by native tastes and talents, a worthy exponent of that branch of American history to which he dedicated so many years. Removed to New York in early boyhood, he became a journeyman in the printing office of William A. Davis, and made such progress in the art that at sixteen he was intrusted with the direction of the office. When the war of 1812 with Great Britain came, he served with honor in the army as sergeant and lieutenant. In 1815, his employer having secured a contract for the printing of Congress, removed to Washington, and Peter Force, at twenty-five years of age, became also a resident and a printer in this city. Here he soon became known as an active and public-spirited citizen, whose judgment and sagacity made an impress upon all who were brought into contact with him. In the seventh year of his residence he was elected to the city council, then to the board of aldermen, being chosen president by both

bodies, and in 1836 he was elected mayor of Washington, and served by re-election four years—until 1840. Besides thus filling with signal ability and dignity the highest civil offices in the gift of his fellow-citizens, he was also honored with the highest military office, having been made successively captain, lieutenant-colonel, colonel, and major-general in the militia of the District of Columbia. He was also for some years president of the National Institute for the promotion of science.

But the great distinctive service rendered by Peter Force to his countrymen was far above the province of the highest official station or military rank. Very early in life he evinced a zealous interest in historical investigations, and four years after coming to Washington he originated and published an annual devoted to recording the facts of history, with statistical and official information of a varied character. This "National Calendar and Annals of the United States," as he called it, antedated by ten years the publication of the old American Almanac, and was continuously published here from 1820 to 1836, except the years 1825, 1826, and 1827, when none were printed. In 1823 Force established a semi-weekly newspaper, the *National Journal*, which became a daily in 1824, and was continued until 1831. This journal was independent in politics, with moderate and conservative views upon public questions, and it drew to its columns some noted contributors, among them John Quincy Adams.

The high-minded conduct of this paper in doing justice to the opponents of the administration once led to a committee of the ruling party (which it then supported) waiting upon Colonel Force and asking him to permit them to edit or revise the political columns

with a view to more thorough partisan effect. They little knew the independent character of the man with whom they had to deal. Colonel Force drew himself up to his full height (he was six feet tall) and with that dignity of bearing which sat so naturally upon him, with his clear gray eyes fixed upon his visitors, he said: "I did not suppose that any gentleman would make such a proposition to me."

Among Mr. Force's publications of greatest value to the students of history were the series, in four octavo volumes, of Force's "Historical Tracts." These were reprints of the rarest early pamphlets concerning America, long out of print, and some of which he could not procure or else could not afford to own, but borrowed them from libraries for the purpose of reproducing them. "Whenever," said he, "I found a little more money in my purse than I absolutely needed, I printed a volume of Tracts." Many of the *rarissimi* of early American history or exploration owe to Peter Force their sole chance of preservation.

The series of American Archives, the great monumental work of his life, was published at intervals from 1837 to 1853. It embraces the period of history from 1774 to December, 1776, in nine stately folio volumes, printed in double column and most thoroughly indexed. These archives constitute a thesaurus of original information about the two most momentous years of the Revolutionary struggle, and especially concerning the Declaration of Independence, of inestimable value. To this work, the bold conception of his own mind, to contain nothing less than the original fountains of American history, reproduced in systematic chronological order, he dedicated his long and useful life. For it he assembled, with keen, discriminating judgment and unwearied toil, that great col-

lection of historical material which now forms an invaluable part of the Congressional Library.

Nor was the literary and historical zeal of the subject of our sketch by any means confined to the early history of America. He dignified and adorned his profession of printer, as did Benjamin Franklin before him, by original authorship in many fields. He was profoundly interested in the annals of the art of printing and the controversies over its true inventor. He gathered by assiduous search a small library of *incunabula*, or books printed in the infancy of the art, representing every year from 1467 (his earliest black-letter imprint) up to 1500 and later. He studied the subject of Arctic explorations, collecting all books published in that field, and himself writing upon it. He was the first to discover and publish in the columns of the *National Intelligencer* the true history of the Mecklenburg "Declaration of Independence" of May, 1775, proving by contemporaneous newspapers he had acquired that the true resolutions were of date May 31, and that the so-called declaration of May 20, was spurious.

MR FORCE AS A COLLECTOR OF BOOKS

No man living can fully tell the story of that devoted, patient, assiduous life-labor spent in one fixed spot, surrounded by the continually growing accessions of books, pamphlets, periodicals, manuscripts, maps, and engravings which contributed to throw light upon some period of his vast inquiry. To say that his library alone filled seven commodious rooms to overflowing; that it embraced besides the largest

assemblage of books ever then accumulated by a private citizen in this country, thirty thousand pamphlets and eight hundred volumes of newspapers; that it was rich in Revolutionary autographs, maps, portraits, and engravings, and that it embraced between forty and fifty thousand titles—all this is to convey but a mechanical idea of the life-long and unintermitted labor which Mr. Force expended upon his favorite subject. He began to collect American books long before the birth of the extensive and mostly undiscerning mania of book-collecting which has of late years become the rage, and he continued the unceasing pursuit until the very week before he was laid in his coffin. He carried off prizes at auctions which no competitor had the knowledge or the nerve to dispute with him. He ransacked the book-shops of the United States from Boston to Charleston for rare volumes.

He had agents to pick up "unconsidered trifles" out of the garrets of New England housewives, and he read eagerly all the multifarious catalogues which swarmed in upon him of books on sale in London and on the continent. On one occasion he was a bidder against the United States for a large and valuable library of bound pamphlets, the property of an early collector, which were brought to the hammer in Philadelphia. The Library of Congress had sent on a bid (a limited one) for the coveted volumes; but Mr. Force's order (intrusted to his agent attending the sale) was peremptory and unlimited, "Buy me those pamphlets in an unbroken lot." They were bought. He knew well enough how to make a bargain, and his purchases were often made at prices which would now seem fabulously cheap; yet he never boggled at a high price when once he was satisfied that he had an opportunity to procure a rare or unique volume, which might never

again be offered to competition. Thus, he used to tell how he had once tried to buy two thin foolscap volumes containing Major General Greene's original manuscript letters and dispatches during the Southern Revolutionary campaign of 1781-'82. The price demanded was two hundred dollars. Mr Force offered one hundred and fifty dollars, which was refused. He then offered fifty dollars for the privilege of taking a copy. This was also declined. Seeing that he could not otherwise possess himself of them, he wisely paid the two hundred dollars, and marched off with the precious volumes under his arm.

Out of his multitude of pamphlets he had many which could not have cost him sixpence each, but there were others for which he had readily paid from two to twenty dollars apiece, rather than go without them. He carried off from an antiquarian bookseller in Boston the only file of Boston Revolutionary newspapers which had been offered for sale in a quarter of a century, and when good-naturedly reproached by some Yankee visitors for thus stripping New England, he conclusively replied: "Why didn't you buy them yourselves, then?" To the last he was untiring in his efforts to secure complete and unbroken files of all the Washington newspapers. These were carefully laid in piles day by day, after such perusal as he chose to give them, and the mass of journals thus accumulated for thirty years or upward filled the large basement of his house nearly full. His file of the printed "Army orders" issued by the War Department was a miracle of completeness, and it was secured only by the same untiring vigilance which he applied to all matters connected with the increase of his library. With the weight of seventy-five winters on his shoulders, he would drag himself up to the War Department regu-

larly to claim from some officer who knew him and his passion the current additions to the printed series of Army orders promulgated in all branches of the service during the civil war. He thus secured for his private collection, now become the historic heirloom of the American people, articles which librarians and other functionaries, trusting to official channels of communication alone, seek in vain to secure.

But Mr. Force was no mere collector of books. He was a man who knew how to use them. Every volume which he added to his richly laden shelves was added with a purpose. Every pamphlet, hand-bill, or newspaper was hailed as it contributed to throw some light upon the history or politics of the past or to illustrate some character in the long picture-gallery of departed American worthies. The greater portion of the volumes in his library, especially the Revolutionary newspapers and pamphlets, were filled with marks and memoranda indicating his careful study and repeated examination. References to other and collateral authorities, notes showing where further information had been published or was to be found, references to catalogues of early printed works, where any volumes of ancient typography had been described—all these and similar elucidations were scattered through the well-thumbed and dusty volumes.

It was not alone with reference to Revolutionary history that Mr Force's zeal as a historical student was enlisted. He had a passion for the art of printing—his own early chosen profession—and had collected a larger library of books printed in the infancy of the art than any public library in the United States could then boast of.

He became widely known as a collector, and books, pamphlets, and periodicals, with frequent offers of

manuscripts, came pouring in upon him. He culled from all what he wanted, and by the steady accretion of years the long, rambling mansion on the corner of Tenth and D streets became filled to overflowing with this great library of facts and documents. There dwelt the sage among his books from an early hour in the morning until late at night.

THE HISTORICAL STUDENT AT HIS WORK.

Let us endeavor to picture our departed friend, who lived to be the worthy mentor of more than a generation of historical students. As a printer he was devoted to his art, and many volumes or pamphlets remain to us bearing the imprint of Peter Force, or of Davis & Force, the former his accomplished partner in the noble art preservative of all other arts. After he ceased to print, and grew to be a devotee to the single aim of historical inquiry, he became more of a recluse than in earlier years. He saw no company save a few chosen friends, and alike to curiosity-hunters and to autograph fiends he turned a justly deaf ear. It was my good fortune in those closing years to see him daily, and in his company to go through all the more precious stores of his vast collection. At eight o'clock each morning I found him always immersed in work, collating or writing amid heaps of historical lore—

Books to the right of him,
Books to the left of him,
Books behind him
Volleyed and tumbled.

No luxurious library appointments, no glazed book-cases of walnut or mahogany, no easy chairs inviting to soft repose or slumber were there; but only plain,

rough pine shelves and pine tables, heaped and piled with books, pamphlets, and journals, which overflowed seven spacious rooms and littered the floors. Among them moved familiarly two or more cats and a favorite old dog, for the lonely scholar was fond of pets, as he always was of children. He had near bits of bread or broken meat or a saucer of milk to feed his favorites in the intervals of his work. Clad in a loose woolen wrapper or dressing-gown, the sage looked up from his books with a placid smile of greeting, for (like that of many men of leonine and somber aspect) his smile was of singular sweetness. As we went through the various treasures of the collection, enabling me to make the needful notes for my report to Congress, he had frequent incidents to tell—how he had picked up many a gem on neglected and dust-laden shelves or from street book-stalls; how he had competed at auction for a coveted volume and borne it away in triumph; how he had by mere accident completed an imperfect copy of Stith's *Virginia* by finding in a heap of printed rubbish a missing signature, and how precious old pamphlets and early newspapers had been fished by him out of chests and barrels in the garrets of Virginia and Maryland. In the rear of his work-room was a little garden (now all built over by the brick edifice erected for the *Washington Post* by Stilson Hutchins) in which he had planted trees, then grown to stately size, interspersed with grass and rose bushes and box and tangled shrubbery. This green retreat or thicket he called his "wilderness," and here he took delight in walking when resting from his sedentary work. His manners were gravely courteous and simple, his conversation deliberate rather than fluent, his tones modulated and low. His talk was often enlivened by an undercurrent of genial humor.

Without egotism or pretension, he was ever ready to impart to inquirers from his full stores of wisdom and experience, while cherishing a wholesome horror of pretenders and of bores. So hospitable was his intellectual attitude that what a simple Scottish swain said of Sir Walter Scott might well be applied to him: "He always talks to me as if I was equal to him—and to think *thot* of a mon that has such an awful knowledge o' history!"

In his physical aspect Peter Force was a man of marked and impressive personality. Of stalwart build, his massive head covered to the last with a profusion of curling hair, his erect bearing, keen vision, and dignity of port impressed the most casual beholder. Once seen, he was not one to be forgotten, for the personal impress was that of a man cast in a heroic mould. Addicted to study as he was and living a singularly laborious life, he yet took active exercise in long walks, and his familiar aspect and courteous recognition was an every-day benison in Washington streets, for he had the respect of all men. His domestic life was singularly fortunate. He brought up and educated a family of seven well-gifted children, some of whom inherited the paternal zeal for historical investigation and produced writings of recognized value.

PLAN OF THE AMERICAN ARCHIVES.

The one great object which overshadowed all other objects with Mr Force was to amass the materials out of which a complete documentary history of the United States could be compiled. His labors as a historiographer are known to comparatively few, since

the great bulk and cost of the published volumes of his "American Archives" confine them chiefly to the large libraries of the country; but by all students of our Revolutionary history and all writers upon it, especially, his work is estimated at its true value. The plan of it comprised, in the language of its prospectus, "a collection of authentic records, State papers, debates, and letters, and other notices of public affairs, the whole forming a documentary history of the origin and progress of the North American colonies, of the causes and accomplishment of the American Revolution, and of the Constitution and Government of the United States to the final ratification thereof."

His contract with the Department of State (executed in pursuance of an act of Congress) was to embrace about twenty folio volumes. He entered into the work with such zeal that the fourth series, in six volumes, was completed and published in the seven years from 1837 to 1844. Three more volumes, forming the commencement of the fifth series, and bringing the history down to the close of 1776, were also printed, when Secretary Marcy arbitrarily stopped the work by withholding his approval of the contents of the volumes submitted to him for the continuation. This was about the year 1853, and this sudden and unlooked-for interruption of his cherished plan and demolition of the fair and perfect historical edifice which was to be his life-long labor and his monument of fame was a blow from which he never fully recovered. It was not alone that he had entered upon a scale of expenditure for materials commensurate with the projected extent of the work; that he had procured at great cost thousands of pages of manuscript, copied from the original archives of the various colonies and the State Department; that he had amassed an enormous library of

books and newspapers which filled his whole house and encroached so heavily upon his means that he was driven to mortgage his property to meet his bills; but it was the rude interruption of a great national work by those incompetent to judge of its true merits; it was the petty and vexatious and unjust rescinding by an officer of the Government of a contract to which he had reason to believe that the faith of the Government was pledged. Mr Force was already over sixty years of age when this event happened. He never renewed his labor upon the archives; the unpublished masses of manuscript remained in the very spot where his work upon them had been broken off, and he could never allude to the subject without some pardonable bitterness of feeling. Friends urged him to appeal to Congress; to try to prevail with new Secretaries of State to renew the work; to sue for damages; to petition for relief. Not one of these things would he do. He had a sensitive pride of character, joined to a true stoic loftiness of mind. An ordinary man would have besieged Congress with his claims and enlisted all his friends in clamorous efforts for some reparation. Not so Peter Force; he could suffer, but he could not beg. There was an assurance of dignity in his very look, which repelled all idea that he would ever be engaged in a scramble for filthy lucre, however unjustly it might be denied him. He never approached a member of Congress upon the subject nor asked a favor where he might have justly claimed a right. He bore his heavy burdens manfully, cheered by no hope of recompense, struggling with debt, but still enduring, still laboring day by day amidst his books, and hospitably receiving and answering all persons who called for information and historical aid. For this unrecompensed service, which became a constantly increasing tax upon

his time he got only thanks. He never made any overtures to sell his library to the Government, nor did he, until two or three years before his decease, entertain any idea of parting with it in his lifetime.

Many proposals had been made to him to buy his collection, either as a whole or by portions, and tempting offers of money had been steadily refused. Finally in 1866, the matter was taken up in earnest by the Librarian of Congress, who shared in the strongest manner the conviction of those who knew its value, that it would be a national misfortune and disgrace if this great historical library should go the way of all other libraries and be hopelessly dispersed; and Mr Force consented to part with the entire collection for the price that had been put upon it by parties who sought to buy it for New York, namely, \$100,000. The press of the country warmly seconded the effort, and the appropriation went through Congress without a word of objection in either House—a rare example of wise and liberal legislation effected on its own merits, without a dollar being expended by anybody or a particle of “lobby” influence in any direction in its favor.

The transfer of the library to the Capitol took place in the spring of 1867. It was watched with careful interest by its venerable owner, who was left to his desolated shelves, and would often lament that he never felt at home without his old and cherished companions around him. He was given free access to the Library of Congress, and invited to take a desk there and continue his studies, but though he often came to the Library, he could not bring himself to sit down and work there. He greatly enjoyed the visits of his children to Washington, and would always insist on walking with them to the Capitol, where he several times ascended the dome—two hundred and eighty feet—with all the ardor of a youth.

His life seemed good for eighty or ninety years until within three months before his death, when his digestive powers began to fail him. He soon reached the point where he could no longer take solid food, from which his strength failed slowly and steadily, and he grew more and more emaciated, though free from pain, until the 23d of January, 1868, when his spirit passed quietly away.

His remains were borne to the grave in the beautiful Rock Creek Cemetery by Richard Wallach, mayor of Washington; George W. Riggs, Thomas Blagden, Dr John B. Blake, Prof. Joseph Henry, Dr William Gunton, J. Carroll Brent, and James C. McGuire—all now departed from the world.

On his grave his children erected a marble monument, on which is carved above the name of Force, as a beautiful and appropriate device, a shelf of books bearing nine volumes, inscribed "American Archives," with a civic crown of laurel.

But his library and his unfinished historical archives are his fitting monument, and these will preserve his name to the future ages of the great Republic as a pure and unselfish patriot and sage, who knew how to labor and to wait.

The PRESIDENT: I am very glad to be informed that before the next paper is read on the First Mayor of the City, ex-Mayor Emery has so far reconsidered his declination, as to express his willingness to say a word.

Mr. EMERY: Mr. President, I wish to say a word in justice to myself. Until I came on to the stage, I was not aware that I was announced to address the meet-

ing to-night. Something over two weeks ago I received a note from the Secretary of the Association, telling me that I would be expected to address the meeting which was to have occurred last week. I replied by saying that I should be absent from the City, and could not possibly comply with the request; I was not aware until yesterday that the meeting was not held last week. I supposed it was. Seeing my name in the list of those announced to speak, I felt I ought to say something, in justice to myself. As I say, I will make no attempt to address the Association. I have not prepared myself at all, and for that reason I do not think I ought to attempt it. I simply felt that I ought to say this much to the Association.

I will say this, however. I came to the City the same year my friend here did, in 1839. I have lived here since that time. My knowledge of the City of Washington is perhaps not equal to that of my friend, but I have a pretty good knowledge of Washington and its affairs, and if I had had time to prepare an address suitable to the occasion, it would have given me great pleasure to have rehearsed some of the incidents that have transpired in my career here. I have taken an active part in the politics of the City, in my early life. I was elected to the Board of Aldermen the first time in 1854, and since that time, as long as we had Mayors, I took an active part in the City politics, and consequently have a pretty good knowledge of what was going on. I am not prepared to rehearse those things to-night, but I will merely state that it would have given me great pleasure, had I been prepared, to address you on this occasion.

The PRESIDENT: We are very much obliged to ex-mayor Emery for the pledge he has now made to prepare a paper for us at one of our meetings next winter.

I now have the pleasure of introducing to you Dr. J. D. Morgan, who will speak briefly of the First Mayor of the City, Mr. Robert Brent.

Dr. MORGAN: Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I might state, in preface of my remarks, that through the courtesy of Mrs. Goodfellow, I am permitted to exhibit the portrait of Robert Brent, the first Mayor of Washington, painted from life, and I believe painted by Rembrandt Peale, the great Anglo-American portrait painter of that time. I will pass around the photograph taken from this portrait.